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Manmade Wilderness: Early Twin Cities Parks Development and Nature in the Urban Landscape

Introduction

Nature is everywhere around us. It shapes the landscapes we move in, the food we eat, the way we travel and the air we breathe. If you are one of the 83% of Americans who live in cities, though, it can be hard to remember the diverse ways that the natural environment impacts your life. Modern urbanites have a tendency to see themselves as separate from nature - it's easy to believe that cities are a bastion protecting us from the whims of the environment. This narrative is supported by the places we look for nature within cities. Nature exists in the park down the street, where you can stroll down the trails and look at the pretty trees, or at the lake where you go boating. Most modern cities contain some sort of parks system. The ways of interacting with nature in these parks systems, however, are not inevitable. In fact, they were strongly shaped by the theories of park design that predominated when they were built. For most American cities, that means the time from the 1860s to the 1910s, when the parks movement was becoming a mainstay of urban design.

Terrence Young characterizes the trends in park design in these first few decades, from the rise in their popularity in the mid-19th century, in terms of two distinct schools of thought. The first is the romantic parks movement, prominent in the ideologies of well-known landscape architects such as Frederick Law Olmsted, who, along with Calvert Vaux, designed Central Park in New York City. Romantic parks advocates saw nature as an essential corrective to the moral evils of the city. They focused on picturesque vistas and beautiful rolling hills, arguing that the

beauty of nature provided spiritual and emotional good to anyone who had access to it. They designed parks to create these beautiful and naturalistic views, then, planting trees, shrubs, and lawn grass rather than using clearly manmade structures or flower plantings.

Around the 1880s, Young takes note of a shift towards another design philosophy, the rationalistic school of parks development. Rationalistic design focused much less on the beauty or inherent moral good of nature and instead treated parks as places for recreation. Areas for leisure activities, such as boating, sports, and playgrounds, were added to parks. The rationalistic period also saw flower beds added to parks, a frequently contentious decision. Rationalistic parks designers saw nature less as an inherent good and more as a staging ground for socially beneficial activities.¹

It can be easy to see these two philosophies as fundamentally opposed ways of relating to parks. However, in the period of time after the initial advent of the rationalistic movement, both schools of thought existed side by side in the rhetoric of park development. Park boards, architects, and citizens drew on ideas from both, often at the same time, to define the ways they thought about nature in cities. In fact, rationalistic and romantic philosophies were simply two sides to a human-centric view of nature that saw parks as improvements to a city, designed and controlled by people, rather than living environments. This contributed to an alienation still prevalent today, where the connections between cities and the environment that pervades and surrounds them is made invisible by an illusion that urban nature only exists in narrowly defined and tightly controlled ways.

¹ Terence Young, "The American Park Movement," in *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850–1930* (JHUP, 2008).

A Unified Parks System

The influence of the various ideologies of turn-of-the-century parks design are stamped onto the faces of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. As the push and pull of these movements played out across the country, park boards of both cities balanced, either consciously or unconsciously, the desire for both rationalistic and romantic features. The way that these features were built into the parks reveals the importance of human design and control that undergirds both philosophies. This perspective can especially be seen in the plans both cities followed as they began to develop citywide parks systems.

In the early years of park development in the Twin Cities, the Minneapolis and Saint Paul park boards both sought out advice from prominent landscape architect Horace Cleveland, a colleague of Olmsted and well-known romantic parks advocate. In both cases, Cleveland advocated a unified parks system spreading through the entire city and reaching out into the rural outskirts in preparation for metropolitan expansion. Cleveland's suggestions, founded in romantic ideology, shaped the structure of parks design throughout the first half century and more of parks development in the Cities. Well into the twentieth century, the two parks boards prioritized aspects of Cleveland's plans such as boulevards, parkways, and securing property for the future as their primary development goals.

By the 1880s, wealthy and well-known public figures in both the cities were advocating for the development of public parks. In Minneapolis, that movement coalesced in 1883 into a bill calling for the creation of a parks commission. This was hardly a universally accepted plan. The City Council, Knights of Labor, and public opinion as expressed in a town hall meeting denounced the bill, decrying the power it gave to the parks commission to raise taxes, condemn lands, and create parks without input from the public. By the reaction of the opposition, it is clear

that the Minneapolis parks bill gave the commission significant power in both its budget and legal jurisdiction. Despite these complaints, though, the bill passed, and on April 3, 1883, Minneapolis had a Park Board.²

Almost immediately upon creation of the board, Horace Cleveland was called upon for planning advice. In his report, which he presented less than two months after the bill was passed, Cleveland stressed the importance of an interconnected system of parks and parkways throughout the city. Along with this advice, Cleveland urged the board to plan their development with an eye not just to the present but also to the future. The city was sure to continue expanding, and therefore the board should buy up rural lands to be later made into parks before the metropolitan area ever reached that extent. According to later Parks Superintendent Theodore Wirth, his advice was followed “religiously” by the boards of commissioners in years to come. Indeed, two decades later Minneapolis was still following this plan, acquiring land on the edge of the Mississippi river that connected Riverside Park and Minnehaha reservation as well as creating a link via boulevards to a similar system in progress in Saint Paul, now known as the Mississippi River Boulevard.³

The Mississippi River Boulevard is a perfect example of the parallel yet critically distinct courses of park development in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. In 1901, when the land on either side of the river was acquired by both parks boards, Minneapolis was already home to a thriving and rapidly growing parks system. Today, the Minneapolis Grand Rounds is one of the longest parkway systems in the US, and according to the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board “has

² Wirth, Theodore, *Retrospective Sketch of the First Half-Century of Minneapolis Park Development under the Board of Park Commissioners, 1883-1933*. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Board of Park Commissioners, 1933), 2–4, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102119248>.

³ Wirth, Theodore, 5; Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Annual Report. 1899-1902” (Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1900), 11, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100344186>.

been the preeminent urban parkway system for more than a century.”⁴ At the same time, Saint Paul was still entangled in a thorny process to connect several of its larger parks with boulevards designed to extend the feeling of walking in the parks even through the city streets. The lands acquired along the eastern edge of the river, which included Shadow Falls Park and several miles of bluffs for development, were intended as part of a similarly interconnected parks system. This system would connect the river parkway through boulevards through St. Anthony Park to Como Park and from there to central locations such as the state capitol and university.⁵

However, this plan was never fully realized. Differing conditions in the powers of the St. Paul Park Board meant that, though they still created many parks and boulevards throughout the city, they were never able to achieve the same success as Minneapolis in making Cleveland’s plans a reality. By the time the Park Board acquired Shadow Falls Park, it was already clear that the current powers of the board were not sufficient for its ambitions. That year, the president of the board included in his annual address a call for amendments to park laws that had made acquisition of land for parks a trial. Unlike the Minneapolis board, the commissioners in St. Paul were not allowed to buy land outright and could only claim it through condemnation, or taking private property for a public purpose. Annual reports of the board at this time contained frequent complaints about similar difficulties acquiring land, such as the land condemned at the same time for Phalen Park and multiple parkways. Like Minneapolis, the St. Paul Parks Board focused on acquiring boulevards and drives that would provide a picturesque approach to their parks and connect them all together.⁶ Unlike Minneapolis, this scheme only met with limited success, as even after amendments to park law in winter 1901, the board was still constrained in its ability to

⁴ “Grand Rounds Scenic Byway System,” Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, accessed April 13, 2022, https://www.minneapolis-parks.org/parks_destinations/trails_parkways/grand_rounds_scenic_byway_system/.

⁵ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul” (Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1901), 9–11, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100344186>.

⁶ “Dr. Scone Scored,” *The Saint Paul Globe*, November 15, 1895.

acquire lands outside of the bounds of condemnation. Land for parkways on Lexington Avenue and Como Avenue approaching Como Park were gained by condemnation that year, and notes of parks that “[lacked] an approach” and needed development of neighboring boulevards would continue to show up.⁷

St. Paul was also stymied in its park ambitions by a significantly lower park budget than that of Minneapolis. Minneapolis Park Board records indicate that in the decade between 1893 and 1902, during which park spending decreased due to a significant recession, the cost of acquisitions and improvements to parks increased by almost \$1 billion, for an annual increase in cost of around \$100,000. Note that this accounts for the increase and cost and not the already existing maintenance costs of the properties already owned by the board. By contrast, the St. Paul board had, in 1899, a total budget of \$64,492.26, of which they used about \$62,000. These vast gaps in budget meant that in St. Paul, parks could only be acquired through condemnation or donation, as the board frequently lacked funding to buy lands outright even if they had been allowed to. The plan for boulevards, even those that would provide an ideal approach to already popular parks such as Harriet Island, then proceeded at a snail’s pace, following the trickle of money the board could spare.⁸

The differing conditions of the Minneapolis and St. Paul Parks Boards resulted in marked differences in the geography of both cities that can still be seen in the present. The Minneapolis Grand Rounds is a nearly complete system included in the National Scenic Byways Program that

⁷ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul” (Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1900), 7, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100344186>; Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul” (Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1902), 17–19, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100344186>.

⁸ Wirth, Theodore, *Retrospective Sketch of the First Half-Century of Minneapolis Park Development under the Board of Park Commissioners, 1883-1933.*; Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Annual Report. 1899-1902.”

includes over 100 miles of biking and walking trails throughout the city.⁹ The St. Paul parks system is also a beautiful system, but its Grand Rounds are still missing many pieces. A project to complete the system was implemented in 2017 and is estimated to cost over \$75,000,000.¹⁰ The impacts of disparities in parks development can be seen all over the Twin Cities.

While the realities of development in St. Paul and Minneapolis were very different, they both stuck closely to Cleveland's original plan. Cleveland's philosophies saw parks as a beneficial part of the city that should be carefully designed, just like every other part of the built environment. Rather than simply preserving the natural areas the park board was able to buy, the interconnected parkway plan saw them expanding those areas and shaping nature to be an integrated part of the city. The parkway plans were part of a strategy of urban design that transformed parks from independent islands of nature in a sea of urban degradation to features of the city landscape. Now, nature was a part of cities - but only a certain type of nature.

Nature and Nurture: Beauty and Use in Park Ideologies

Cleveland was a member of the romantic parks movement, the first major movement of park development in America. Although its successor, the rationalistic parks movement, was well underway by the end of the 19th century, the language and rhetoric of the romantic movement still dominated the parks discussion. Olmstead's designs and those of his contemporaries in the 1860s had leaned strongly on the idea of the picturesque landscape, a stretch of green space that gave the impression of undeveloped countryside. The designs of this period demonstrated the idealized vision Americans had of "the country". Well-known writers

⁹ "Grand Rounds Scenic Byway System." The system is still missing one link connecting East River Parkway with Saint Anthony Parkway. A current plan to fix this gap is estimated to take many years.

¹⁰ "Saint Paul Grand Round," Saint Paul Minnesota, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/design-construction/current-projects/saint-paul-grand-round>; Kathleen Anglo et al., "Grand Round Design and Implementation Plan" (Saint Paul, MN: City of Saint Paul, n.d.).

such as Thoreau and Emerson wrote in purple prose about the lovely, untouched wildernesses of their youth, often pitting the simple virtues of the country against the squalor and noise of the city. Given this dichotomy, it made sense that romantic parks advocates saw the building of parks within the city as a societal good that would provide spiritual and even moral enrichment to its citizens. Their plans were for vast green lawns, ornamented with trees and shrubs that at every angle provided a beautiful vista. Parks design even forty years later owed much to this philosophy. Not only was the larger scheme of development heavily shaped by the input of Horace Cleveland, himself a romantic parks designer, but the ideas of romantic park development were echoed in this time period in addresses by parks boards, public discussions of parks, and magazines for landscape architects.

Within the boards of park commissioners of both St. Paul and Minneapolis, emphasis was frequently placed on the planting of trees and shrubs and shaping of natural features for the purpose of creating a beautiful view in line with romantic ideals. President J. A. Wheelock of the St. Paul board described in 1900 an extension to Como Park that would “form a very attractive driveway, commanding a continuous succession of beautiful views of the park.”¹¹ The desire for a continuous natural area, both within the park itself and in approaches park-goers may take to get there, was a frequent refrain in the call for boulevards leading to parks. Not only would these boulevards provide a direct path between parks, but, essentially, the impression of natural beauty would be extended and not broken by the intrusion of unsightly city streets.

The Mississippi River Boulevard development was an extension of these romantic goals. Unsurprisingly, as it followed closely the plans laid out by Cleveland, rhetoric around the drive focused on the beautiful views it would provide for park-goers walking or driving along the

¹¹ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul,” 11–12.

bluffs. Wheelock described it (multiple times!) as a “driveway of unequalled beauty” through a “picturesque ravine” and “commanding, at every turn, through the screen of foliage, enchanting glimpses of the river scenery”.¹² It would take the entire space of this essay to repeat the extent of the romantic imagery he repeatedly called on to extol the virtues of both this and other parks developments, including Como and Phalen parks, in addresses both to the parks board and to the general public.

This impression of nature that the parks were designed to evoke was also very specific to the romantic movement. Parks were planted with trees and shrubs, arranged in such a way as to create a harmonious whole. In fact, parks boards frequently made an effort to plant native trees and flowers. Minneapolis Parks Board commissioner Charles M. Loring recommended in a 1913 article that the board plant more elm, hackberry, white maple, linden, or basswood, all native trees to Minnesota.¹³

However, trees such as this were not allowed to grow freely in the parks as they would in the wilderness. In romantic parks, trees and shrubs were placed and landscaped in a way that gave the impression of what park designers saw as natural beauty. Forested areas that would naturally grow more thickly were trimmed to emphasize the “pleasing features of individual trees and the natural massing of woodland effect.”¹⁴ Parks without a preexisting woodland or lake often consisted of well-trimmed lawns of Kentucky Bluegrass dotted with stands of trees or shrubs. They looked almost as far from a living habitat as the streets of the city that surrounded them.

¹² “St. Paul’s Beautiful Parks Are Made Ready for Summer Visitors,” *The Saint Paul Globe*, April 10, 1904.

¹³ Rufus J. Haight, ed., “Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening,” *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening* 23 (1913): 142, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011440843>.

¹⁴ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul,” 16.

Romantic parks designers picked and chose which aspects of nature to emphasize and which to remove entirely. Jens Jensen, a landscape architect, bemoaned the “interference” of maintenance crews that over-trimmed the natural woods. At the same time, he encouraged “a clean-cut grass edge”, roads and paths kept clean of dirt, and lakes cleared of vegetation.¹⁵ He may have disagreed with some other figures in park maintenance on the details, but the broader bent of Jensen’s argument was common. Parks should be maintained by humans to look a certain way, a way that was neat and clean and emulated the idyllic countryside of 19th century American authors. While parks proponents continually championed the virtues of nature in the city, this nature was not the same as the nature of the countryside or of the forest. It was scrupulously designed and made to appeal to human tastes in ways that were and still are made invisible by our romantic perception of what nature should be.

That perception was closely connected to a view of nature as a source of beauty akin to the art that decorated some parks. A significant trend in the language of the early 1900s in discussing parks was the use of the word “ornamentation” to refer not only to the sculptures and art that was designed to enhance park beauty, but also to the nature within the parks. President Wheelock, of the St. Paul board, recommended at various points in his 1899 address “the ornamentation of the vacant strip” on McKenty street to make it eventually “embosomed in the surrounding groves of trees”, the widening of Como avenue so that “it can be made capable of effective ornamentation”, and the donation of “ornamental structures such as fountains, statues, and other works of art”.¹⁶ The planting of trees was an ornament rather than an integral part of the parks system as it was built. Here, it can be seen that parks boards looked at their designs not

¹⁵ Haight, “Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening,” 51.

¹⁶ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul.”

as a connected ecosystem but as a built structure to which they could add ornamentation and new features as needed for the purpose of the city.

By Popular Demand

At the same time, a new way of thinking about parks was gaining strength and creeping into the rhetoric of the parks department. The rationalistic parks movement saw new ways to use parks for the good of people. Designers started to add recreation facilities such as skating rinks, tennis courts and playgrounds. In some places, such as Como park, gardens were added with a variety of flowers planted. In contrast to rationalistic design, these flowers were placed deliberately, without an attempt to make them appear part of the natural landscape of the park. As rationalistic aspects of parks grew in popularity, park boards balanced these new features with the desire for a unified and romantic whole. Although they were sometimes at odds, the rationalistic and romantic parks philosophies more often went hand in hand in shaping the landscape of parks in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Between the florid descriptions of the natural beauties of their parks and boulevards, parks commissioners of both the Twin Cities noted with a similar pride the rationalistic facilities that adorned those parks. In 1899 the Superintendent's Report of St. Paul noted the skating, boating, and concerts in the parks, as well as a new playground under construction for various types of sports and donations of animals to a "zoological collection" that the park board lacked the funds to maintain.¹⁷ The report also noted floral displays planted in small parks and squares. The report of the Minneapolis Park Board in 1893 presented a similar story, touting the popularity of boating and winter sports in various parks. In almost every park mentioned, the

¹⁷ This collection would continue to exist as a haphazard group of animals until the first major structures of Como Zoo were built in the 1930s, according to the Como Zoo Conservatory website. The later history of the Como Park Zoo is similarly rocky; for a summary see Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom Guidebook.

floral display was described as being “larger than any previous year”, despite this being a recession year characterized by a significant decrease in the board’s budget. These were not throwaway mentions either; they were noted with pride at the end of each park’s write-up.¹⁸ The rationalistic aspects added in these years were seen as enhancements to the significant natural charms of the parks themselves.

Enthusiasm for the new park features was not limited to the people who had installed them. Throughout the entire country, public demand for leisure activities in parks increased steadily. Whenever these features were mentioned in park board reports, they were accompanied by notes on their extreme popularity. In conjunction with a description of the concerts put on in the St. Paul parks in 1899, Superintendent Nussbaumer noted that the pavilion that provided seating for the audience “proved entirely inadequate” given the high attendance. Nussbauer observed similar complaints about the warming rooms for skating, the barely existent zoo, and carriage services.¹⁹ Although some of those services would be expanded in the coming years, both St. Paul and Minneapolis would continue to see growing demand for these services in their parks, and each new year saw a call for improved facilities in some area or other. It seems surprising, given that this was such a consistent issue, that the parks boards were so consistently caught off guard by the popularity of these features. Perhaps they simply chose to allocate their limited budget elsewhere, rather than building recreational facilities to accommodate future demand.

As time went on, the rationalistic movement only grew. A prominent landscape gardening magazine in 1913 focused a full issue around playgrounds in parks. The opening editorial read,

¹⁸ Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. and Board of Park Commissioners, “Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Minneapolis, 1894,” 1895, <https://cdm16022.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16022coll55/id/404>.

¹⁹ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul,” 23–25.

“[t]here is scarcely a day that does not bring to the observant student of park affairs evidence that the playground movement is growing faster than almost any development in modern park affairs.”²⁰ Although the playground movement, as this magazine chose to differentiate it, was only a small portion of the rationalistic parks movement (and in this case very specifically did not include the many other ways the rationalistic movement saw recreation appearing in parks), its prominent placement here indicated not only changing design theories but the strength of popular demand.

These rationalistic characteristics did not replace romantic ideology in park design. In fact, they were both seen as equally essential aspects of the natural landscape in a city. Two excerpts from contemporary sources illustrate how beauty and use were closely tied together in the way park boards and designers thought about parks.

The 1900 President’s Report for the St. Paul Board of Parks Commissioners features a brief description of the newly-acquired Phalen Park and its planned improvements. One of these improvements was creating a boatway between the lakes that President J. A. Wheelock claimed would make it “in some respects the most attractive park in the city.” At the same time, the boatway would allow for recreational boating. The parks board developed the natural beauty of the park, in a deliberate and romantic way, while providing opportunities for recreational facilities. In building this “water promenade” where people could walk, drive, and sail through the park, the board saw the beauty and recreational facilities of parks as complementary.²¹

In merging the romantic and the rationalistic approaches, the Twin Cities followed national trends. Landscape architect Jens Jensen, who designed parks in Chicago, Racine, Wis.,

²⁰ Haight, “Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening,” 89.

²¹ Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul, “Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Saint Paul.”

and Springfield, Ill., alluded strongly to both in his 1913 article.²² The “beauty and usefulness,” he says, of pools and lagoons “depend upon their being kept free from weeds.” He goes on to give examples of what he means by beauty and usefulness, alternating between the character of the lake, ease of boating, the “character and beauty of the water border”, skating facilities, and the beauty of the park in winter.²³ This passage could be easily divided into two sides and neither the rationalistic nor the romantic side would be emphasized more strongly. Jensen clearly sees these as the two primary ways of thinking about parks, but like many others of the time, he does not privilege one over the other. They are both to be preserved and defended from the real enemy - in this case, improper park maintenance.

While most landscape architects and park designers worked with a balance of both parks ideologies, there was still some conflict from those who protested the inclusion of playgrounds or flower beds in otherwise picturesque parks. An article in a Boston paper pointed out the lines of the debate in that city, saying that while the park board was firmly of the opinion that parks should be kept “as nearly as possible in their natural state”, the recreational facilities they did have were incredibly popular with the citizens of Boston.²⁴ Like in the Twin Cities, the rationalistic parks movement in Boston was driven by public demand. Unlike the Twin Cities, the park board did not fully embrace the will of the people at that time.

In St. Paul, however, the board went so far as to defend rationalistic features from their detractors who wanted parks to be unified stretches of natural beauty. Undoubtedly this had something to do with the fact that the superintendent of the board, Frank Nussbaumer, was a florist, and very devoted to the floral displays especially in Como Park. In the words of Park

²² Jensen is a fascinating figure in the history of parks design and conservationism, known for his use of native ecology in his plans. For more information on him, see Anna Maria Gillis’ profile “Jens Jensen Designs the Prairie” for the NEH or his entry in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

²³ Haight, “Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening,” 51.

²⁴ Haight, 65.

Board President Wheelock, “[the floral display] has not escaped the criticisms of those who have borrowed their notions from the austere canons of a modern school of landscape architects who regard cultivated flowers as an artistic profanation of the holy ground consecrated to grass and trees and shrubbery.”²⁵ Despite his cutting tone, the president still showed an affinity for romantic parks ideas in his descriptions of various parks, including the non-flower-covered majority of Como parklands. As in Wheelock’s address, the tension between rationalistic and romantic aspects of parks was often resolved by conceding that different characteristics suited different parks. Como Park would get the floral display, the boating, and the concerts, while Phalen got the sylvan wilderness. It is worth noting that even where Phalen Park is characterized as a more naturalistic park, it still incorporates some leisure activities, just as Como is still home to vast stretches of naturalistically landscaped plants.

In Minneapolis and Saint Paul as in the rest of the US, these two fundamental theories of park design clashed and converged to define the landscape of parks throughout the cities. Those who made decisions about parks had to balance the popularity of leisure activities with the desire for beautiful scenery. In many ways, the standards of beauty and use were able to exist side-by-side in both the ideas presented and the physical geography of parks systems.

Conclusion

Though the rationalistic and romantic parks movements both emphasized different aspects that define a park, the divide between them obscures a strictly prescribed way of thinking about nature in cities that persists to this day. Even in their romantic desire to emulate nature, park proponents did not want freely-growing, self-sustaining ecosystems in their cities. The nature they sought was heavily landscaped and maintained to create the impression rather than

²⁵ “St. Paul’s Beautiful Parks Are Made Ready for Summer Visitors.”

reality of natural beauty. The addition of rationalistic elements only served to further underscore the fact that the purpose of parks was not to bring nature into the city but to create spaces for human use, whether that be recreation or admiring beauty. In doing this, 19th century citizens sought to circumscribe the way they interacted with nature to a narrow subsection of their lives, disregarding the myriad other ways that the natural environment expressed itself in the metropolitan area.

In St. Paul and Minneapolis, the growth of the parks systems were unique in that they were both strongly influenced by the work of one man, landscape architect Horace Cleveland. His advice resulted in a string of boulevards and parkways that created a cycle of green space around the Twin Cities and along the banks of the Mississippi River. Just as natural features ornamented the parks themselves, the Grand Rounds became an ornament to the city, an improvement similar to museums or libraries. The parks of the Twin Cities modified the already significant ecological richness of the Mississippi River habitat to serve a human-centric relationship with nature. This relationship is still ingrained in the way we interact with urban green spaces to this day.

The works of Cleveland and the Park Boards of both cities, as well as the parks movement across America, had a broader impact in terms of the way city dwellers relate to the world around them. Parks are not by any stretch of the imagination the only or even the primary way that the living environment impacts cities. Natural disasters, resources and the paths they travel, and the places we store waste are all environmental factors that shape the lives of urban residents. Relegating “nature” to a few specific, and tightly controlled, areas in the city makes it easy to see cities as separate from nature, even though they most definitely are not. Humans are not and will never be extricable from the living systems of our world. The trajectory of parks

development that started in the 1870s and continues to this day is one of many factors that cause urbanites and others to forget this fact.

Outside my room, Summit Avenue, a prominent boulevard built by the parks system, stretches several blocks to Shadow Falls Park and the Mississippi River Boulevard. At the top of the park is a garden filled with beautiful, well-manicured flowers, and a bike path that follows the contours of the river. You can walk or ride down that path and look out over the gorgeous views of the river bluffs, only slightly marred by the occasional storm drain. Step onto one of the footpaths leading down to the river, and you walk through what Park Board President J.A. Wheelock called “a thick native growth of trees and shrubbery.”²⁶ Even with whatever updates have occurred, the essence of the parks has changed little from what was first designed 120 years ago. The ideas of nature that predominated then have been built into the fabric of our cities today.

²⁶ “St. Paul’s Beautiful Parks Are Made Ready for Summer Visitors.”

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